

“Both/And” Appropriation Strategy Sheet

Different people approach appropriation with different motivations. Identifying the underlying rationale can help you determine how to approach the conversation.

1. When appropriation includes gross distortion of the original and the stated motivation is to **express oneself freely or just have fun**.

Personal storytelling – The first goal is to make a connection. Ask the person why they selected the appropriated item or image. Tell a story that highlights when you’ve had a similar attachment to an object. Then discuss a complicating story about a time when something you valued was used inappropriately by others and how that made you feel. Ask if they’ve ever felt upset by something similar.

2. When appropriation includes display of the original out of its original context and the stated motivation is to **show my appreciation for another culture**.

Focus on motivation – Ask a lot of questions. It is quite likely that underneath the sense of appreciation is a personal longing for a culture that is richer than what is experienced as dominant U.S. white culture. If this can be acknowledged, then a conversation about how to address the cultural loss without appropriating from another culture may be possible. The individual likely does not believe there is harm in their appropriation, so eventually you will likely need to focus on the overall pattern of economic exploitation, desacralization of religious objects, or misuse.

3. When appropriation includes adoption of spiritual practices and the stated motivation is to **participate in life-giving, traditional ways of living**.

Focus on harm reduction – It is highly unlikely that you will convince someone to abandon practices they find healing. However, if a movement away from the individualism of U.S. society is a part of their motivation, then there is an opening to ask about how their practice achieves this goal. Also, questions about what the person has learned about the people who originated the practice may be useful. It may also be helpful to discuss what obligation is created through the appropriation. Is the person politically engaged in ways that support the group that originated the practice? Do they care about what those individuals think about people appropriating their cultural practices? Why or why not? How is an intent to “do not harm” being lived out?

4. When appropriation is continuing, and yet the person is **confused about decision-making**.

Empathize and provide support for thinking through – A lot of conversations involve people who already know that appropriation is wrong, and continue having trouble avoiding it. They may be frustrated and just want a rule book. Or, they may feel so deeply that their form of appropriation is really okay because of their positive intent or special circumstance. Either way, maintaining an open posture to help the person think through their primary motivation can be helpful. Posing questions about whose experience is being privileged in their thinking may help.